

The government of Singapore, led by the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP), continued to resist growing calls at home and abroad to allow its citizens a bigger role in governance. The next general election is scheduled for January 2017, and the PAP has already increased its efforts to suppress independent voices, especially those who question or criticize the regime online.

In November 2014, blogger Roy Ngerng Yi Ling was convicted of defamation for a blog post suggesting mismanagement of Singapore's retirement savings system; the court had not yet assessed damages at year's end. Blogger Alex Au faced continued legal battles after being held in contempt of court for two online articles critical of the judiciary's treatment of cases dealing with same-sex sexual activity.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 19 / 40 [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 4 / 12

The president, whose role is largely ceremonial, is elected by popular vote for six-year terms, and a special committee is empowered to vet candidates. The prime minister and cabinet are appointed by the president. The unicameral, 99-seat Parliament includes 75 members elected in Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), a mechanism intended to foster ethnic minority representation, and 12 members elected from single-member constituencies. An additional 9 members are appointed by the president, and 3 are from a national compensatory list. Members serve five-year terms, with the exception of appointed members, who serve for two-and-a-half years.

The top-polling party in each GRC wins all of its four to six seats, which has historically bolstered the majority of the dominant PAP. Up to nine Parliament members can be appointed from among leading opposition parties to ensure a minimum of opposition representation; three seats were awarded following the most recent elections. Up to nine additional, nonpartisan members can be appointed by the president. In recent years, critics—including civil society organizations—have questioned whether the GRC system is the best way to ensure minority representation.

Elections are free from irregularities and vote rigging, but the PAP dominates the political process and uses legal harassment to deter opposition leaders from seeking office, as well as delineation to redraw (or eliminate) electoral districts to minimize support for the opposition. The country lacks an independent election authority. The 2011 parliamentary elections featured vigorous, coordinated efforts by opposition parties, which put forward candidates for 82 of the 87 directly elected seats, the highest number since independence. The largest opposition party, the Workers' Party (WP) took an unprecedented six directly elected seats, including a five-seat GRC, demonstrating that the PAP's advantage in the GRC system could be challenged. The WP also received two seats from the national compensatory list. The Singapore People's Party (SPP) was allocated the remaining opposition seat. The PAP took 81 seats, although it had secured only 60 percent of the overall vote.

The first contested presidential election since 1993 was held in 2011, with all candidates running as independents, in accordance with the constitution. Former deputy prime minister Tony Tan, the

PAP-backed candidate, won the race with 35.2 percent of the vote, narrowly defeating three opponents. The results confirmed the growing strength of opposition parties and an increased willingness of the electorate to vote against the ruling party.

In a 2012 by-election for the Hougang single-member constituency, Png Eng Huat of the Workers' Party defeated the PAP candidate, 62 percent to 38 percent, retaining the seat for the opposition. In a 2013 by-election, Workers' Party candidate Lee Li Lian defeated the PAP nominee to win the party's seventh elected seat, reducing the PAP to 80 seats.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 8 / 16

Although opposition parties have gained ground in recent years, their campaigns and activities are constrained by a ban on political films and television programs, the threat of defamation suits, strict regulations on political associations, and the PAP's influence on the media and the courts. In August 2014, the registration of a new party—Singaporeans First—was accepted by the authorities. In addition to the WP and SPP, other officially recognized parties include the Singapore Democratic Party, the National Solidarity Party, the Reform Party, and the Singapore Democratic Alliance.

The PAP has governed without interruption since the British colony of Singapore obtained home rule in 1959, entered the Malaysian Federation in 1963, and gained full independence in 1965. Moreover, the country has had only three prime ministers: Lee Kuan Yew from 1959 to 1990, Goh Chok Tong from 1990 to 2004, and Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong from 2004 to present day. The elder Lee remained active as "senior minister" during Goh's rule and as "minister mentor" from 2004 to 2011; he was also active as a parliamentarian in 2014.

Electoral rules, as well as regulations aimed at preventing ethnic or religious conflict, make it difficult for parties based on ethnic or religious grounds to garner support.

C. Functioning of Government: 7 / 12

Singapore has been lauded for its lack of corruption, though issues of transparency remain a concern. The country was ranked 7 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index. However, there is increasing concern over the deeply entrenched position of the country's political elites. In February 2014, the former protocol chief for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lim Cheng Hoe, was sentenced to 15 months in prison for committing fraud amounting to \$89,000 while in office.

Ministers in the government can serve in several capacities simultaneously. Legislators are allowed to and often do serve on the boards of private companies, including as chairpersons, which creates conflicts of interest.

Civil Liberties: 32 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 9 / 16

The government maintains that racial sensitivities and the threat of terrorism justify draconian restrictions on freedoms of speech, but such rules have been used to silence criticism of the authorities. All domestic newspapers, radio stations, and television channels are owned by companies linked to the government. Editorials and news coverage generally support state policies, and self-censorship is common, but newspapers occasionally publish critical content. The Sedition Act, in effect since the colonial period, outlaws seditious speech, the distribution of seditious materials, and acts with “seditious tendency.” Popular videos, music, and books that reference sex, violence, or drugs are also subject to censorship. Foreign broadcasters and periodicals can be restricted for engaging in domestic politics, and all foreign publications must appoint legal representatives and provide significant financial deposits. Both traditional outlets and foreign-owned information providers such as Yahoo! have had to meet stricter licensing requirements and face legal challenges in recent years, which have been perceived as forms of harassment to hinder the free flow of information.

The internet is widely accessible, but authorities monitor online material and block some content through directives to licensed service providers. Singaporeans’ increasing use of social-networking websites has sparked interest in social activism and opposition parties, contributing to opposition electoral gains. The Media Development Authority requires news websites to apply for individual licenses that are subject to annual renewal, post a financial bond with the regulator, and respond to removal orders within 24 hours. Major websites are prohibited from “advocating homosexuality or lesbianism.”

Bloggers increasingly risk being charged with defamation. Prominent blogger Roy Ngerng Yi Ling faced a defamation suit from the prime minister in 2014 after covering corruption in the management of Singapore’s retirement savings plan. Ngerng was fired from his job at a hospital with approval from the Ministry of Health and in November was found guilty in the suit. In October, Senior State Counsel Tai Wei Shyong, acting for the attorney general, urged the High Court to hold blogger Alex Au, who actively advocates for the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people, in contempt of court for two blog articles that suggested a “systemic bias” in Singapore’s judiciary against cases involving same-sex sexual activity; no judgment had been issued by the end of 2014.

The constitution guarantees freedom of religion as long as its practice does not violate any other regulations, and most groups worship freely. However, religious actions perceived as threats to racial or religious harmony are not tolerated, and groups like the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Unification Church are banned. Religious groups are required to register with the government under the 1966 Societies Act. The government forbids the wearing of headscarves (*tudong* in Malay) by women who hold public sector jobs that require a uniform, but public debate continued in 2014 about the right of women to wear headscarves in the workplace; the Prime Minister stated that the government’s position was “evolving,” but no policy changes were made by year’s end.

All public universities and political research institutions have direct government links that enable at least some political influence. Academics engage in political debate, but their publications rarely deviate from the government line on matters related to Singapore.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

Public assemblies must be approved by police. A 2009 law eliminated a previous threshold requiring permits for public assemblies of five or more people, and political events involving just one person could require official approval. Permits are not needed for indoor gatherings as long as topics of discussion do not relate to race or religion or involve a foreign speaker. Throughout 2014, protesters held a series of

demonstrations calling for transparency in the management of the Central Provident Fund, a mandatory pension system. At least six individuals were arrested during one of the protests in September for demonstrating outside of the designated protest zone.

The Societies Act restricts freedom of association by requiring most organizations of more than 10 people to register with the government, and the government enjoys full discretion to register or dissolve such groups. Only registered parties and associations may engage in organized political activity, and political speeches are tightly regulated.

Unions are granted broad rights under the Trade Unions Act, though restrictions include a ban on government employees joining unions. Union members are prohibited from voting on collective agreements negotiated by union representatives and employers. Strikes must be approved by a majority of members, as opposed to the internationally accepted standard of at least 50 percent of the members who vote. In practice, many restrictions are not applied. Nearly all unions are affiliated with the National Trade Union Congress, which is openly allied with the PAP. Workers in essential services are required to give 14 days' notice to an employer before striking.

F. Rule of Law: 7 / 16

The government's overwhelming success in court cases raises questions about judicial independence, particularly because lawsuits against opposition politicians and parties often drive them into bankruptcy. It is unclear whether the government pressures judges or simply appoints those who share its conservative philosophies. Defendants in criminal cases enjoy most due process rights. Prisons generally meet international standards.

The Internal Security Act (ISA) and Criminal Law Act (CLA) allow warrantless searches and arrests to preserve national security, order, and the public interest. Government agencies, including the ISA, conduct surveillance using extensive networks and sophisticated methods to monitor telephone and other private conversations. The ISA, previously aimed at communist threats, is now used against suspected Islamist terrorists. Suspects can be detained without charge or trial for an unlimited number of two-year periods. In 2014, Singapore actively detained Muslims seeking to join the Islamic State (IS). A 1989 constitutional amendment prohibits judicial review of the substantive grounds for detention under the ISA and of the constitutionality of the law itself. The CLA is mainly used to detain organized crime suspects; it allows preventive detention for an extendable one-year period.

The Misuse of Drugs Act empowers authorities to commit suspected drug users, without trial, to rehabilitation centers for up to three years. The death penalty applies to drug trafficking as well as murder, although judges may use discretion to impose lighter sentences under some circumstances. The penal code mandates caning, in addition to imprisonment, for about 30 offenses, though the punishment is applied inconsistently. Singapore's highest court, the Court of Appeals, heard a constitutional challenge against judicial caning in August 2014; caning remained legal at year's end.

There is no legal racial discrimination, although ethnic Malays reportedly face discrimination in both private- and public-sector employment. The LGBT community in Singapore faces significant legal obstacles. Section 377A of the penal code criminalizes consensual sex between adult men, which is punishable by up to two years in prison. The law is not actively enforced, but the Court of Appeals upheld its constitutionality in October. Attempts to promote tolerance and acceptance of LGBT Singaporeans continue. The Pink Dot parade, held annually in support of LGBT rights since 2009, drew an estimated attendance of 26,000 in 2014.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 12 / 16

Citizens enjoy freedom of movement, though opposition politicians have been denied the right to travel in the past. The government occasionally enforces its policy of ethnic balance in public housing, in which most Singaporeans live.

Women enjoy the same legal rights as men on most issues, and many are well-educated professionals. There are no explicit constitutional guarantees of equal rights for women. Women do not have legal protections against marital rape except under special circumstances. No laws protect against discrimination on the basis of gender in employment, and few women hold top positions in government and the private sector. Twenty women won seats in the 2011 parliamentary elections.

Singapore's more than 200,000 household workers are excluded from the Employment Act and are regularly exploited. A 2006 standard contract for foreign household workers addresses food deprivation and entitles replaced workers to seek other employment in Singapore, but it fails to provide other basic protections and benefits, such as vacation days. A 2013 law requires that new contracts grant household workers one day off per week but allows employers to offer compensation in place of the day off if the worker agrees.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)